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ABSTRACT

Group counseling has been shown to be an efficient use of a school counselor's time and an effective tool for working with students. In process groups, the emphasis is on the process of growth and interaction. Counselors face obstacles they must overcome in order to organize effective group counseling programs in secondary schools. Gaining staff and administrative support for group counseling is one priority. Support can be gained by offering staff members a positive personal experience with group counseling within the school setting and by making effective presentations to staff at in-service sessions. A second priority involves addressing the logistics of time, place, and scheduling for group sessions. An optimal number of group members in secondary schools appears to be between 7 and 10 and one 90-minute group session per week appears to allow for continuity without disrupting schedules. More growth may occur in a process group of limited, defined duration. A school semester provides a convenient time frame. A rotating schedule may work well because it prevents students from missing the same class each week. The location must assure privacy, informality, and intimacy. Counselors must advertise the group counseling, recruit participants, and conduct pre-group interviews with students. The initial group meeting provides a time to establish ground rules, assure confidentiality, and make acquaintances. There are many strategies for maintaining a focus in group sessions. Whatever strategies a counselor uses to begin and end each session, it is critical to hear from each group member at both of these times. Participation in a process group can reduce students' social isolation, increase their self-esteem, and teach them that conflict is healthy and can be resolved in a productive manner. (NB)

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Conducting Effective Process Groups in the Secondary School

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Abstract

This paper presents specific suggestions which will assist school counselors in setting up and conducting effective process-oriented counseling groups. Strategies for gaining staff support are discussed. Pre-group screening techniques, logistical considerations such as scheduling of groups, session length and duration, location etc. are described. Techniques for establishing ground rules, the initial group meeting, opening and closing sessions, and maintaining a process emphasis are given.

The literature supports the notion that group counseling is not only an efficient use of counselor's time, but a highly effective tool for working with students. In fact, Dyer and Vriend (1980) say that group work is " the single most effective counseling strategy available to school counselors (p.18)." However, the evidence is that group counseling is not utilized in many secondary schools (Carroll, 1979; Larrabee & Terres, 1984). A recent survey of state guidance directors showed that 62% of secondary school programs were unlikely to be providing group counseling for students (Peer, 1985).

Although the lack of counselor training in group work may be a factor in the conspicuous absence of viable group counseling programs in schools, practical considerations may also inhibit the introduction of such programs. The purpose of this paper is to provide strategies for overcoming obstacles to the organization of effective group counseling programs in secondary schools, to raise issues which must be resolved before a program is implemented, and to suggest some intervention techniques which are useful in actual group counseling sessions.

For the purpose of this paper, I will define group counseling as a process of using group interaction to facilitate self-understanding and self-acceptance. It is an experience which seeks to improve interpersonal skills and functioning. I will use the term "process group" to refer to one in which the emphasis is on this process of interaction and growth. This is in contrast to "support groups" which focus on a particular problem or concern shared by the members.

Gaining staff and administrative support for group counseling is clearly a priority. In addition to administrative approval for use of counselor's time, staff support is essential for a workable referral process. In addition, in most programs, students will need to be excused from classes in order to participate, and staff members can sabotage a program by making this difficult. Staff members are more likely to support a program whose advantages they believe in, and the strongest support will come from those who have had a positive personal experience with counseling groups. One way to generate this kind of suport is to provide that personal experience for staff members within the school setting. There are several approaches to this strategy. In this writer's situation, which is a small public alternative school with a staff of 10, it was possible to have the entire staff participate together in a group conducted by a social worker employed by the school district. The decision to use an outside facilitator was

reached in order to allow the counselor to participate equally with all other staff members in this group. At another, larger school, where an all-staff group was impossible, the counselor offered a group on a voluntary basis for interested staff members. The level of participation was higher than anticipated. In both cases, the experiences were positive and resulted in a significant core of staff who recognize the value and growth potential of groups.

In addition, effective presentations can be made to staff at in-service sessions. Literature can be cited to support group work in schools, and students who have benefitted may be willing to make personal statements about their experience. However, such presentations will have much greater impact if there are staff members who can relate the program to their own personal experience.

Once staff support has been accomplished, the next task in implementing a group counseling program is to address the various logistical considerations regarding time, place, schedules, etc. Most faciliators would aggree that the optimal size of a group for secondary students is seven to ten students. A much smaller group will not provide the diversity which is necessary for a productive group, and if there are more than ten, interactions become too complicated and intimacy more difficult to achieve.

Generally one session per week allows for enough continuity without disrupting schedules. The interval between sessions also allows time for students to apply learnings from group to their daily interactions, and to do any "homework" generated by the session. This writer prefers at least 90 minutes per session, particularly with groups with close to ten members, and use two consecutive class periods to get that block of time. This allows time to include everyone in the opening of the session, as well as time to focus on any issues which present themselves for work. It allows assures sufficient time for processing and closure, without which the impact of a session can be lost. However, the reality is that in many schools, one class period will be the limit of time available, and many colleagues work effectively within those constraints. The key is to pace the session so that opening and closure are not neglected.

My experience has been that more growth occurs in groups of limited, defined duration. A school semester provides a convenient time frame which works well. In a group which continues indefinitely, it is all too easy to postpone significant risk-taking, rationalizing that there is plenty of time. There is also a level of familiarity

after a period of time which may be comfortable, but which does not provide the challenge that dealing with a new group will. Students who find the experience valuable and wish to continue beyond the semester are therefore welcome to do so, but they will need to join a new group. The limited duration also allows the counselor to accomodate new students and to form new groups with relative frequency.

In a small alternative school, it is possible for teachers to release students from the same class on a weekly basis, but this is not advisable in many school settings. In addition, a student may find the burden of missing the same class once a week too great academically. So, a rotating schedule seems to work best, where the group will be held during 1st period one week, 2nd period the next, and so on. The slight incovenience to the counselor is more than outweighed by the advantages to students and staff. One procedure which seems helpful is to require that the students check in with the teacher whose class they will miss in order to be excused. This personal contact will provide an opportunity for getting assignments or notification of pending exams, etc., and also forces students to take responsibility for their attendance.

The location for group counseling sessions is an important factor, as it will help set a tone and atmosphere. This is particularly important in a school setting, where one wants to establish a climate distinct from the less personal and more authorative atmosphere of the classroom. At a minimum, the location chosen must assure privacy, provide a level of informality, allow everyone in the group to see everyone else, and be small enough to encourage intimacy or closeness. The setting should be different enough from the classroom to make a statement that the work done is also different from that in a classroom. Different furnishings, such as chairs rather than desks, a lockable door and/or "Group in session - do not disturb" sign, and a circular seating arrangement will begin a create a conducive environment.

Group facilitators must decide whether their groups will be open or closed with respect to membership. Some groups, particularly in community mental health settings, operate well with continually changing membership. In school groups, however, I have found that a consistent membership (closed group) allows for trust and inclusion issues to be resolved earlier, and for group cohesion to develop. The critical factor in school groups is that students will have contact with other members outside of the group time, in classes or social events for example, and therefore students (especially adolescents who are

particularly peer-oriented) are especially senstivie to questions of confidentiality. If new members are continually being added, trust and inclusion are perpetual issues, as are separation and closure for departing members, so that it seems difficult to establish an effective working stage.

Perusal of the contents of many counseling journals shows a proliferation of support groups, and school counselors doing group work seem to follow this trend. I feel very strongly, however, that the more heterogeneous the group, particularly with respect to issue, the more meaningful the experience is likely to be. For one thing, a heterogenous group parallels the diversity one encounters in the real world, where one is not likely to find only people who are experiencing the same struggles. In fact, one tends to expect people in similar circumstances to understand one's struggles, but may find it a real challenge to deal with individuals who have a very different perspective. Learning to do so, and possibly gaining the support and empathy of such a person, can be the powerful experience of a group. For example, I have worked with all-female groups, in which it seemed easy to discuss some sensitive issues. But when those same young women later participated in a group which included men, they reported that although it was more difficult at first to be trusting and open, they learned more and grew more in the mixed group. Another advantage to groups not limited to a particular theme is that students may not want to identify with a topic. Whether their perception is accurate or not, they may decline to participate in a group with that focus (divorce, loss, drugs and alcohol for to name a few popular themes) because they believe it is not a problem for them. Allowing them to participate in a group without a pre-determined focus gives them a chance to discover what really are their important issues. The diversity of members usually presents a variety of coping styles, which allows for imitation and modeling. Often, one of the most meaningful moments in the group is the discovery that this apparently disparate group of individuals has so much in common, usually at the feeling level. For example, the student who risks sharing that he was abused and that he feels no one would understand how that has affected him may be overwhelmed to discover that others in his group have had similar experiences. The impact of this discovery is diminished in the support group, where the student may rationalize that the counselor has found the only students in the entire school who have this problem, reinforcing the feeling of isolation from the larger social group.

The absence of a pre-determined focus places responsibility on the group to find its own direction and needs, which is a central part of the process. What do we want to gain from this experience? How can we make that happen? The emphasis becomes discovering commonalities, forming relationships, and establishing trust. Given my definition of a process group, heterogeneous memberhip would be a key ingredient. Rather than learning about an issue, eg. divorce or substance abuse, participants in a process group learn about finding support and communicating with others, a help with any problem they may face.

Once these practical considerations have been resolved, the counselor needs to advertise the availability of group counseling and recruit participants. Initially, classroom presentations, brochures, etc. are helpful. Referrals from staff, other counselors, and students are very important. Once a program is established, recruitment is less likely to be a problem than accomodating interested students.

A pre-group interview with interested students is one of the most critical points in the process. This is an opportunity to both inform the students about group counseling so that they have a clear notion of what the experience has to offer them, of what is expected of them, and of what they can expect from the counselor/facilitator. At the same time, the counselor has an opportunity to screen the students, firstly to insure that this experience is appropriate for them, and then to balance the groups. Certain individuals should be advised to seek other forms of counseling. Those who are severely disturbed, extremely fragile, or hostile or potentially violent, should deal with these issues before participating in a school counseling group.

During the interview, the counselor will want to learn if the students have had previous experiences with group counseling. If so, were these positive or negative? In what type of setting? Students may have expectations based on previous experiences, and it is important to let them know what similarities and differences they can expect from this new group. Figure 1 is a sample of a handout (adapted from Bates, Johnson, & Blaker, 1982) which can be given to the student at that time. It can serve as a guide for presenting information to students, as well as an invitation and reminder which the student can later refer to.

During this interview, the counselor should give the students time to talk about themselves, noting how articulate they are, and how comfortable they seem to be talking about personal matters. What are some possible issues/goals for them in the group? When organizing the

groups, it is important to balance these factors in the groups. Placing all the shy individuals in the same group would create a very difficult situation. Having one or two individuals with prior group experience can be very helpful. Placing individuals with the same presenting issue in different groups will help establish the heterogeneity discussed earlier. Attempting not to put close friends in the same group will also make more effective groups, as well balancing the number of males and females.

Once this preparation and groundwork has been accomplished, the group is ready to begin. The first session of any group is a critical one. It is necessary to establish and discuss ground rules, to begin to get acquainted, and to get a sense of how it will be in this group Members are typically somewhat nervous the first session, so I give them an opportunity to look around and breathe and get accustomed to the setting while I present the ground rules which I consider non-negotiable. Although some of these will have been alluded to in the pre-group interview, it is nevertheless a good practice for all members to hear them together. Many of these rules are more accurately norms, and will likely need to be reviewed. But when the proscribed behavior does occur in the group, it is helpful to be able to refer to the first session's discussion.

I begin with confidentiality. Because this is so important, I do not simply define the term, but I explain any limits I have such as legal restrictions. I also suggest that there will be times when something which occurs in the group touches or upsets them, and they may feel the next meeting is too far off to contain their feelings. I remind them that they may discuss such things with other members of the group without violating the rule of confidentiality, and also make myself available. I also point out that it is likely that friends and significant others will question them about what happens in the group, and we suggest responses which can be given without breaking the rule. This strategy of practicing responses is helpful enough that we may repeat it at the end of the session, doing a brief re-entry rehearsal. "When you leave this group today, and your friend asks you what happened in there, what honest answer will you give that will respect the privacy of our session?" Students typically will suggest general comments such as, "I got to know some new people," or "I found it easier to talk about feeling than I thought I might", etc.

I next explain the right to pass during go-rounds, letting them know that each of us may have times when we are

not ready to respond and that that's okay. I also quality this rule by indicating that the right to pass should not be used as a license for non-participation. We are all here because we want to become involved in this experience, but we must respect those times when members are uncomfortable, and acknowledge their right to privacy.

Particularly in the school setting, and with adolescents, I feel gossiping is a practice which cannot be permitted. It is a misuse of the group's time together to focus on a person who is not with us. I also discourage gossiping in the Gestalt sense, which is talking about someone in the third person who is present and can be addressed directly. I model the approriate use of language with an example. Something like, instead of saying, "I appreciate John's smile," I can say, "John, I appreciate your smile right now. I feel as though you're really relating to what I say."

Although it would appear to be understood, I think it needs to be stated explicitly that members are not to come to group under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and that violence or threats of violence are not acceptable.

At this time, we also talk about the difference between honest feedback and put-downs and suggest that put downs are not appropriate in the group.

The following rule grew out of several situations which occurred in groups I have led, and was suggested by the group itself. If group members develop relationships outside the group, it is important that the group be aware of that. The individuals' behavior will likely change because their relationship with that person may be more important that the relationship to the rest of the group. They may develop "private jokes" or knowing looks which can be divisive if the group is unaware. In addition, conflicts they have outside the group will affect the whole group and need to be brought before it.

Since participation in a group is voluntary, members certainly have the right to leave the group. But we ask that they agree to two conditions. First, all must agree to remain for at least three sessions, so that their decision is based on some real sense of what the group will be like, rather than an initial impression or discomfort. The second is that if a member decides not to continue in the group, he or she come and tell the group personally. The member who leaves can easily become the most powerful member in the group. Remaining members will wonder about the departing person's commitment to confidentiality and tend sometimes to take responsibility for the leaving. Allowing the opportunity to discuss these concerns with the departing

individual usually mitigates these problems. In practice, I have found that people rarely want to leave the group, and on one occassion, the required personal announcement of intent to leave generated the most open and meaningful session for the person, who then chose not to leave.

By the time all these rules have been presented, members are usually ready to participate. I generally begin with a go-round, asking everyone to give their name and one thing that they would like the group to know about them at this point. It is important to begin processing right away. How comfortable were you with this introduction? What did you notice about the kinds of things people chose to say about themselves? How was your behavior typical of the way you are outside this room? Who would you like to respond to? At this early stage, it is important to encourage members to speak directly to each other. I also model all behaviors I hope to see. In doing go-rounds, I do not proceed in order around a cricle, but encourage people to respond when they are ready. I sometimes begin, but not always, and always participate myself.

At this point, and often in the group, I use "1-10's" in go-rounds because a lot can be revealed with a minimal response, and is particularly useful if members are somewhat nervous. I might say, "On a scale of 1 - 10, how comfortable are you in this group right now?" If there is a low score, I might ask, "What would you need to be a 10?"

Because I believe that our expectations are more likely to be met if others are aware of them, I ask each member to share their hopes and expectations for the group experience. I often ask, "What are you willing to do to help that happen?" Generally, common themes begin to emerge, and it is important to help members notice and comment on them. Typically, concerns about trust and rejection are voiced. It can be helpful to encourage specificity here, saying "What could people do to reject you here?" Beginning to talk about these feelings about the group is the beginning of the development of trust.

Particularly in early sessions, with inexperienced members, it is important to deflect the focus from the leader. Comments will often be directed at the facilitator, and it is easy to encourage involvement with other members by saying such things as, "Who in the group would you like to tell that?" and avoiding eye contact with the speaker. Counselors sometimes neglect this strategy, and the groups then become more like individual counseling with an audience, in which most interactions are with the leader. This defeats the purpose of the group, and should be carefully attended to.

Other than these opening strategies, I avoid the use of games and exercises, because they provide an agenda which may not be what the group needs. To begin to get acquainted, I usually offer an open-ended statement like "What is going on in your life right now that this group might help you with?" I encourage reactions and responses to each other, and focus on how the member feels about sharing with the group, etc. I also discourage advice-giving, pointing out that giving advice robs the person of the satisfaction of solving the problem himself, and sometimes makes a complex situation seem simple. We model other kinds of responses to each other, since advice-givers often don't know what else to say and are merely trying to demonstrate concern.

Closing is always important, but especially so in the first session. Making sure to hear from each member insures that no one is leaving with unfinished business with the group. I encourage and model appreciation statements. What was the most meaningful moment for you here today? Who touched you today? Can you tell them? Who seems most like you? Who are you most curious about? Who did you get to know today? Is there anything you would regret not having said to the group or anyone in particular? What did you learn today?

Strategies for maintaining a process focus in subsequent sessions are similar to those used in the first session. 1-10's are often helpful, and can be used with commitment to the group, how your life is going, how helpful the group experience is, etc. Keeping the focus on the group is maintained when the responses are followed up with "What are you willing to do to be a 10?" "How can this group help you be a 10?" "Who in the group could help you change that?", etc. Using open-ended questions such as "What would you like to happen here today?", "How shall we start today?" "How are you hoping today's session will be different for you?" etc. help generate interactions without dictating the direction or content of those. After several sessions, it is often the case that members anticipate your comments and begin making them on their own.

Encouraging a here-and-now focus is also essential in a process group. If a member continues to focus on events outside the group, statements like, "How is that important to you right here and right now?" "I wonder why that is affecting you at this moment" will help direct attention on the group. "What can the group do for you right now?" and "What would you like from us?" also assist members in articulating their needs.

Disruptive behavior rarely occurs in a group, and if it does it should be the group's issue. If no one in the group seems concerned, it may be the leader's problem rather than the group's. Again, the group may need help expressing their concerns, so commenting "I'm finding myself quite distracted right now. Is anyone else?" It is also helpful to view disruptive behavior as a part of the process. Asking why the person chose the particular moment for the behavior may be very revealing. Such behaviors may be distractions from sensitive issues, or attempts to rescue another member from discomfort, etc. If the group can discover these motives, they can also devise more direct ways to express such concerns.

Continuing to encourage responses to each other is necessary until members are comfortable to do so without prompting. When a member has obviously shared something difficult, the leader may say, "John took a big risk to share that with us. Can you tell him how you were affected by what he said?" Also, helping members ask for feedback and response is modeling the behaviors appropriate for the group. "Now that you've shared that, what would you like from us? Is there anyone in particular you'd like to hear from? Tell them."

Go rounds are very efective in involving the whole group. If a member says, "I wonder what they think of me?" the leader can urge going around the group and asking each one. Who would you like to start with? Is there anyone you're reluctant to hear from? Such comments as "No one would understand" can be followed by "Go around and tell each person what they don't understand about you." Or, "Go around and tell each person what you don't understand about them."

If there is a quiet member, there often comes a time where others are bothered by that. The most common reaction is to attack the person with such remarks as "How come you're always so quiet?" Asking the speaker to notice why he/she is concerned about that is often revealing. Replies may indicate that the speaker is worried that the quiet member does not trust the group and is offended, etc. Expressing that is important, and the quiet person may then wish to react to that concern. The facilitator should also model appropriate ways to express concern, such as "This has been a rather intense session today, and I'm wondering how you've been affected," or "I'm wondering how this experience is for you right now." Being sure to include quieter members in opening and closing parts of each session will make it easier for them to respond. Sometimes the quiet

person just needs an invitation to participate, and such interventions as suggested above will allow them to do so.

Whatever strategies the counselor uses to begin and end each session, I feel it is critical to hear from each member at both of these times. Some people have difficulty asking for attention, and may not express something rather pressing unless an opportunity is made. Hearing from everyone at the end of sessions prevents unspoken frustrations from affecting the group process.

Although I indicated an aversion to games and exercises, I do think it valuable to see that the final session accomplishes closure. I urge each member to share their learnings with the group, and to say anything they will regret not having said. I often do ask each member to verbally present a symbolic gift to each other member which expresses how they have experienced that person in the group. This can be a very moving exchange, where feelings can be expressed which might otherwise go unspoken.

Participation in such process-oriented groups as have been described above can reduce social isolation, demonstrating that the student is not alone. The feeling of support and concern from other students can increase self-acceptance and trust of others. There is also an increase in self-esteem from being helpful to others. Students learn that is is okay to express feelings, and that others often feel the same way. Honest feedback from others can provide an opportunity to change behaviors in a supportive atmosphere, and the variety of people in the group offer a number of coping styles which can be modeled. Students may learn that conflict is healthy and can be resolved in a productive manner. These are the learnings that will truly contribute to growth and which will be empowering regardless of the challenges they meet.

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Figure 1. Sample handout to be given to student at pre-group screening interview.

GROUP COUNSELING

TO THE STUDENT

This was written to help answer some of your questions about group counseling. You will find included some questions that have been asked by other students, which may be helpful in explaining how you will fit in. You may have other questions or thoughts to discuss so please feel free to ask.

WHAT IS GROUP COUNSELING?

Group counseling can mean many things to many people, but it provides an opportunity to:

1. talk about common concerns or problems
2. express your feelings in a small group
3. help you to understand how you are seen by others

HOW OFTEN DO WE MEET?

The group will meet once a week for 2 hours.
You will earn credit in your regular class. You may continue in the group if you are dropped from school. Meetings will begin on time and end on time.

WHO IS GOING TO BE IN THE GROUP?

Sheri and 6 to 10 other students who have expressed an interest in discussing their feelings, goals, and other interests. The group members may be both boys and girls.

WHAT CAN I GAIN BY BEING IN A GROUP

1. You may come to understand others in the group more clearly.
2. This understanding of others can help you to see and evaluate yourself more clearly.
3. You may gain an understanding of your strengths and benefit from these.
4. It gives you a place to express yourself and your feelings.
5. You may find you have concerns similar to others in the group and realize that you are not alone.

WHAT WILL BE EXPECTED OF ME?

Some of the things the group would expect of you would be:

1. to be there on time
2. to be honest
3. be willing to listen to the others
4. be willing to respond to others

DO I HAVE TO BE IN THE GROUP

No, but we would like you to be if you want to.

CAN I QUIT THE GROUP?

You may leave the group anytime you wish to do so.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO RESERVE A PLACE?

YOUR OBJECTIVES: